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ABSTRACT

Within the education environment, writing journals are being used across the curriculum and for a variety of purposes--they are often recognized as a means for prompting students to apply the perspective of a particular discipline to their own lives or to facilitate their gaining perspective on personal transitions. Successful use of journals in the education arena incorporate three things: (1) a definition of what is meant by the term "journal" in the particular discipline or class; (2) a decision regarding how the use of a journal will be integrated into the teacher's instructional practices; and (3) a determination of the method, if any, of formally evaluating journal entries/activities. Keeping a journal provides students in introductory courses with a directed opportunity to apply the critical thought processes to course content, class environment, teaching strategies, and individual lives and careers. Journal writing is a natural, effective tool for use in a classroom environment: a tool for facilitating critical thinking and the application of communication concepts to daily life. (Contains 39 references.) (RS)

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# Journals as Part of The Learning Process

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"Four Desperate Days," "Jottings from the Third Reich," "Portrait: A Glimpse into the Lives of Students Past," and "Diaries for My Children" are only a few of the article titles in contemporary magazines that draw our attention to journal writing. Journal writing has long been recognized as a valuable tool for problem solving, self-discovery, and encouraging an individual to reflect on daily activities and life. Ben Franklin, George Washington, Lewis and Clark, Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson and Anne Frank provide us with strong examples of the wealth and importance of information which can be gleaned from the journals and journal entries of individuals.

By the same token, collections of journals can provide insight into a culture and how that culture may have changed. To illustrate, the Chronicle of Higher Education [May 27, 1992] recently heralded the Stewart S. Howe Collection for providing a look at student life as a way of defining our culture and how it has changed. This particular collection--primarily scrapbooks and journals--provides insight into the lives of students at a multitude of colleges and universities from the late 1880's to the present. Diaries of Americans living in the rural districts of southern Michigan and northern Ohio in the 19th-century have been identified not merely as a compilation of tasks completed but as representative of the expression of rural, preindustrial concepts of time, place, community, and self [Motz, 1987]. The renaissance of "life writing" and the renewed interest on the part of a variety

of reading publics in both the historical and literary importance of diaries is also highlighted in "On the Trail of American Diaries" [Arksey, 1987].

These examples provide impetus for the concept that journal writing allows the individual to become innately involved in the learning process both as a writer of the journal and a reader/user of the entries. It is through the written entries in a journal that an individual has the opportunity to examine history (personal or public) as a means for dealing with the present and planning for the future.

Within the education environment, journals are being used across the curriculum and for a variety of purposes. They are often being recognized as a means for prompting the student to apply the perspectives of a particular discipline to his/her own life or to facilitate the student gaining perspective on transitions with which he/she is dealing.

The Teaching Professor [February, 1992] reports that some of the most frequent reasons cited for using journals include the following.

1. Journals offer a powerful way to assess student knowledge at the higher levels of learning.
2. Journals effectively focus student attention on values, attitudes and ethical issues.
3. Journals provide for self-exploration and self-discovery.
4. Journals encourage students to think and require an articulation of their thoughts.
5. Journals make education personal.
6. Journals improve writing.

The literature does not reveal any one reason or goal as being more successful or important than any other when using journals to enhance the learning process.

It is important to note, however, that the successful use of journals in the education arena incorporates three things.

1. A definition of what is meant by the term journal in the particular discipline or class. That definition must be determined before you start and articulated clearly to your students so that you all will share a common vision.

2. A decision must be made regarding how the use of a journal will be integrated into your instructional practices--e.g., what goal(s) is journal writing going to help achieve; will in-class time be used for writing; will all entries be made outside of class; will the writing be free form or will there be a specific focus to pursue in developing entries.

3. A determination of the method, if any, of formally evaluating journal entries/activities. If an evaluation process is to be employed, a clear criteria must be established and communicate to the students--e.g., completed/not completed; pass/fail; weighted categories; traditional grading format. If no formal evaluation is to occur, it may be wise to explain to the students why they are being asked to participate in an activity for which there is no formal evaluation process. [The Teaching Professor, 1992.]

It is from this basis that we dentified journal writing as an interactive approach to instruction with both the student and the teacher as learners. In addition, we accepted journal writing as a natural, effective tool for use in a classroom environment: a tool for facilitating critical thinking and the application of communication concepts to daily life. We identified an additional advantage to us in using journals as a method of learning; that advantage was that there would be no right and wrong answers [Strackbein and Tillman, 1987]. Each journal and journal entry was

to be approached as a letter about the writer's world at a given point in time[Strackbein and Tillman, 1987]. A letter that was used to foster and monitor the development of critical thinking skills.

Critical thinking is defined as a process the individual uses to move from assumptions to applications to consequences based upon information, reason and experience; critical thinking, as an activity, is used to determine truth and value [Paul, 1989; Totten, 1990]. The general assumptions employed in this study were grounded in the belief that keeping a journal would provide the student in the introductory course with a directed opportunity to apply the critical thought process to course content, class environment, teaching strategies, and individual lives and careers [Sternberg, 1987; O'Keefe, 1986]. Credence was given to the concept that keeping a journal could help the student find out what they thought and felt as well as increase their powers of observation [Abercrombie, 1991; Warren, 1982]. It was also recognized that the very act of recording behavior gave the student writer a quasi-outside perspective on himself/herself and an opportunity to make life or behavior adjustments [The Writer's Digest, May, 1987].

The importance of the development of critical skills is crucial to today's citizenry. As a world in a state of transition, the multitude and speed of change with which we are all confronted reflects a need for critical skills on the part of the citizenry as never before [Grice and Jones, 1989]. It is imperative we all be

able to use the process appropriate to evaluating ideas fairly, effectively, and efficiently--that is, thinking critically. The ability to interpret, analyze or manipulate information in order to answer a question or solve a problem is the personal responsibility of an effective citizenry [Newman, 1988]. An added impetus for developing critical thinking skills is associated with the fact that the current output of information far exceeds our ability to think critically [Totten, 1990]. For the professional educator this means developing manageable practices and procedures that encourage all students to analyze, synthesize and utilize information rather than memorize it [Murbach, 1986]. As part of the process teachers, on all levels, must learn how to maintain authority and while encouraging students to challenge ideas [Murbach, 1986].

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